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Today's News

February, 4, 2005 06:46 AM

Robo-pharmacist

BLUFFTON: Little business at Sun City has big machine to help fill prescriptions.

Mark Kreuzwieser
Carolina Morning News

One hometown pharmacy is getting a little more high-tech.

Okatie Pharmacy, a small, independent drugstore on William Pope Drive next to Sun City Hilton Head, is the first in South Carolina to use Durham, N.C.-based Parata Systems' "robotic dispensing system."

Pharmacy owner Lou Scavo says the \$187,000 computer fills a prescription in 20 seconds.

"The standard, manual method of filling prescriptions creates a lot of time-consuming issues," he said Wednesday.

"Pharmacists can use extra time for educating patients, paying attention to surgical supplies and medical needs other than prescriptions."

A pharmacist since 1988, "before we were even really using computers," Scavo said business growth and the increasing number of prescriptions necessitated reaching out for technological assistance.

"My business grew to the point I had to do something," he said. "In South Carolina, you can only have two technicians per pharmacist, or three if one is a certified technician, so a robotic dispensing system was the answer."



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Lou Scarvo, pharmacist and owner of Okatie Pharmacy, stands by as the robotic arm of the pharmacy's new dispenser drops filled prescriptions into the appropriate alphabetized slots. Kim Rowland/Carolina Morning News



Jessica Michaud, left, hands a customer his prescription Wednesday at Okatie Pharmacy. The pharmacy's new robotic drug dispenser allows the employees to have more personal interaction with customers. Kim

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Though the machine does a big job, it takes up relatively little space, about 12 square feet. The device holds a total of 250 plastic cells on two sides. Each cell holds a different prescription.

Rowland/Carolina
Morning News

It doesn't do liquid prescriptions, "unfortunately," Scavo said.

He said the robotic dispensing system handles about 65 percent of his prescriptions.

David Burke, a pharmacist at Burke's Main Street Pharmacy on Hilton Head, is kicking the tires on a robotic dispensing system made by ScriptPro LLC of Mission, Kan.

"We are considering it because an automated system would bring a lot of improvement in efficiency," Burke said Wednesday. "Any time you can get a machine to perform some of the more mundane tasks, a pharmacist can spend more time with patients."

He and Scavo agreed it's the wave of the future for pharmacies, large and small.

"I know of one big drugstore chain that is getting ready to sign a contract with Parata," Scavo said. "It's going to become a necessity for everyone because prescriptions are increasing, especially with the baby boomers" being prescribed more medications.

Burke agreed. "Volume is increasing for everyone, and good staff is harder to find. Automated dispensing systems also take out a lot of chance for human error" in filling prescriptions.

There are several firms worldwide in the robotic dispensing manufacturing business, and Parata Systems owns several patents, company Marketing Manager Nanette Kirsch said Wednesday.

What makes Parata's system different from others is "air technology," said company Vice President for Marketing Tom Rhoads.

"Pills are blown by air and collected in a bottle, with a computer sensor keeping count," he said. "The system can count and fill 25 pills a second compared to other technologies' five to 10 a second."

As computer technologies advance, researchers have found more ways to blend automation with distribution.

Though fairly new to the pharmaceutical business, robotic dispensing systems have been widely used in other industrial applications, including tool-making, chemical development, scientific research and development, and auto-making.

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I, pharmacist: The robot grasps an empty medicine bottle, attaches a label and moves the container to a circuit board compartment where a programmed number of pills are dispensed. A robotic arm twists on a cap and places the filled prescription in an alphabetized tray - all in a matter of seconds. For information on Parata Systems, point your Internet browser to www.parata.com.

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